



The Helaire Family of Oakland Plantation (1780-1865)



The Contributions of The Helaire Family to Oakland Plantation

The Helaire family worked on Oakland plantation as enslaved people from the late 1700s until 1865. The family 's association with Oakland Plantation has spanned over six generations. Like so many formerly enslaved families they continued to work as sharecroppers from early 1870s until the late 1950s. Although the Helaire family story is unique, their history is but one part of the story of African and African-American labor that contributed to the economy and history of Oakland Plantation. Collectively their labor and lives during slavery and after emancipation sustained the viability of Oakland Plantation and contributed to the wealth of the Prud'homme family who founded Bermuda/Oakland Plantation in the 1780s. The Helaire family story, like the story of all of the enslaved and tenant families that worked on the plantation, is truly one of determination, faith and ingenuity in the face of enslavement and racial oppression . Their family legacy is in many ways a reflection of African-American advancement under adverse conditions in Louisiana and the United States.

In the Beginning

Between the years 1777 and 1804, while states above the Mason Dixon line passed antislavery legislation freeing the Northern enslaved population, the first member of the Helaire family was captured from Africa and enslaved in Louisiana. In the late 1700s, before the Louisiana Purchase, Hilario, described as a "Guinea Negro" was taken to an area from Natchitoches to Cloutierville along the Red River ironically known as La Cote Joyeuse or "the joyous coast" as the property of a planter named Langlois. It is unclear when Hilario met Jeanne, an enslaved woman owned by Jean Pierre Emmanuel Prud'homme, but they eventually had a son in 1809 named Hilaire in honor of his father. In that same year on December 7, 1809 Hilaire was baptized along with twenty-two other slaves belonging to Jean Pierre Emmanuel Prud'homme. His

father, Hilario, was also baptized eight years later on June 26, 1817. Because Hilaire's mother, Jeanne, belonged to Jean Pierre Emmanuel Prud'homme at the time of his birth, Hilaire was most likely born on Bermuda/Oakland Plantation. Hilaire, his mother, Jeanne, his wife, Felis, and Hilaire's seven children born into slavery remained the human property of the Prud'homme family until the end of the Civil War.

What was life as a slave like on Oakland Plantation?

Enslaved people, including the Helaire family, literally had a hand in every aspect of operation on Oakland Plantation. They were responsible for all of the labor on the plantation and worked on a daily basis in the agricultural fields and in the main house. However, even with all of their contributions, it is difficult to describe their lives as slaves on Oakland Plantation. Each enslaved person experienced slavery differently according to their occupation, gender, age and status in the slave community. They also internalized the concept of being a slave in different ways so it is difficult to describe the "typical" slave experience. Furthermore, documents speaking to the enslaved experience at Oakland Plantation are limited and primarily from the perspective of white plantation owners or overseers, whose main objectives were to document labor and crops, not the internal life of the enslaved, therefore we do not know much about the lives of enslaved people outside of the labor they provided. Despite these difficulties and the absence of a direct enslaved perspective on life as a slave on Oakland Plantation, a vast amount of information about the Helaire family and other enslaved people has been ascertained from the farm journals kept by Pierre Phanor Prud'homme, who expanded and owned the plantation from the early to mid-1800s until 1865 and Seneca Pace, a white overseer on the plantation in the 1850s and 1860s. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) slave interviews conducted with formerly enslaved rural Southerners in the 1930s and 1940s can also provide information about enslaved people's experiences in other parts of Louisiana which can be useful when contextualizing the lives of Oakland Plantation's enslaved population.

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*Courtesy the Cammie G. Henry
Research Center*

Slaves on Bermuda/Oakland worked six days a week from sunrise to sunset. They were divided into multiple labor gangs. There were gangs for picking cotton, cultivating corn, hoeing and planting. There were additional gangs for cotton ginning and pressing, land clearing and fence building. As a driver, Hilaire would have been responsible for supervising the labor on the plantation, weighing the crops, reporting all work to the overseer and possibly punishing fellow enslaved people, including his own family. There has been a great deal of debate between historians of African-American history concerning the social and psychological complexity of the black driver's role on the plantation. The driver has been viewed as having independence not granted to other slaves because of his role as part of the white planter authority system. Following this theory, the driver has a "honored" status within the plantation economy and slave community. The WPA narratives give some details supporting the theory of the slave driver as a marginal or middle man between the will of the master and the community of the enslaved. These interviews describe the driver as significant in the slave community and as agents in the coercive machinery of the plantation. It is not clear if Hilaire's role as a driver was pivotal or insignificant in the slave community. However, it is clear that he was highly valuable to the Prud'homme family. In 1849 Hilaire, then listed as age forty-two, and his mother Jeanne, age sixty, were appraised at 1,100 *piastres* (Spanish currency). In 1850 he and his mother were valued at \$1500 and in 1853, as a driver, he was valued alone at \$1,400. The only slave valued more highly was the plantation blacksmith. Perhaps Hilaire's status as driver also allowed him certain privileges. He like every other slave on Bermuda plantation was permitted to have a garden plot, however, only he and a few other enslaved men owned their own cattle. In 1860 Seneca Pace marked and branded two heads of cattle for Hilaire and in 1862 Pierre Phanor Prudhomme paid him for a steer that had been sold to a white planter.

**Filis
or
Phillis
Langlois**

from the perspective of the dominant white culture, "men's work". In Seneca Pace's daily record of events in 1860 he lists Felis/ Phillis as a washer for the house. He also mentions her picking a total of 785 pounds of cotton in one week. When enslaved women were doing what was considered "women's work" like spinning cotton, they often worked in the company of other women, both black and white. In the fall of 1862, Felis/ Phillis was assigned the duty of carding cotton with six other women while the enslaved men were being sent to work as teamsters on fortifications or with the artillery during the Civil War. Recognizing the challenges of enslaved African-American women like Felis/ Phillis would include acknowledging their "double oppression" as female and black and praising their unique creative solutions to the problems that they faced as enslaved laborers, wives, mothers, and friends. Enslaved African-American women lived in a world dominated by both black and white men and were denied the protections that the dominant white society offered white women; but still remained women. Enslaved women established their own definition of womanhood, created families and fought hard to maintain

When the Civil War came and left Oakland Plantation in 1864 Helaire and Felis/Phillis had seven young children and did not own any land. Although Pierre Phanor Prud'home complained in 1864 that "12 men-8 negresses- [and] 12 children out of the field" left with the Union Army, Helaire's family was not part of this exodus. They, like so many other formerly enslaved families, decided to contract with their former owners and stay on Oakland Plantation as sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Helaire's descendants eventually occupied the North Tenant Cabin from 1920 to 1957 as tenant farmers. This cabin was constructed in 1859 but provided housing for tenants on Oakland Plantation after the Civil War. Sharecropping in a post-slave society was not simply an extension of slavery. Sharecropping, tenant farming and the debt that came along with these systems were new techniques designed to control the progress of the newly freed African-Americans.